



A Delineation of Subjugated and Peripheral Culture in India: A Comparative Study of Selected Novels by Indira Goswami and Shobhan Bantwal.

Luzana Borgohain

Department of English, Tinsukia, Assam, India

Received: 21 Jan 2026; Received in revised form: 22 Feb 2026; Accepted: 25 Feb 2026; Available online: 28 Feb 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper will provide a critical examination of how India which is although rich in culture, values, customs and tradition can also be peripheral and subjugated which frequently gives birth to difference of violence resulting in the exploitation of the female subject and erasing their individual self. By analyzing selected novels, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Dowry Bride*, this paper delves into the mechanism constantly used to exploit the 'marginalized' sections within the realm of gender politics.



Keywords— Bodily Desires, Dowry, Exploitation, Gender Disparity, Marriage, Tradition, Widowhood.



I. INTRODUCTION

Indira Goswami who owns the pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami was a writer, activist, poet from Assam. Her writings bring to light many social injustices prevalent in the society. In her novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah) she brings to light how the lives of widows in a Sattrā are succumbed under the heavy weight of tradition.

The second author taken up for study is Shobhan Bantwal, an Indian-born American novelist. Bantwal in her novel *The Dowry Bride* critically explores the theme of traditional arranged marriage and its intersection with the malpractices such as dowry system which stays deeply entrenched in the Indian Culture.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

This part of the paper intends to explore the research gap and try to explore the research gap and try to initiate the scope for attending the work.

In the Journal, "Representations of violence against women: a study of selected Indian fiction" (Sikha, 2012) states that the present research project is an attempt to map

a concrete feminist theory that articulate these instances of violence that have been previously ignored or underplayed.

In the Journal, "Feminist Nuances in the select novels of Shobhan Bantwal P.Sivakami and Meghna Pant" (K.Padmalata manepalli, 2023) states that Bantwal endeavors to explore the delicate issue of Dowry and subsequent problems reflected in a woman's life as a bride when she steps into the institution of marriage.

From the above we get to know how different scholars have considered the two selected novels *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Dowry Bride* through the general lenses of violence or feminism. Therefore this fixed limitation of the two novels actually camouflages harsher realities and societal truth Indian Culture and tradition hold. Hence this research seeks to fill the gap and explore more about the peripheral and subjugated nature about the Indian cultural traditions that eternalize domestic violence and gender biases.

OBJECTIVES:

- To critically analyze the two selected novels as far as Indian traditional norms and culture is concerned
- To investigate into the exploitation and subjugation of women in the selected novels.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the proposed work of the selected novels of Indira Goswami and Shobhan Bantwal has been identified for primary research attention which will be critically analyzed. The study will make use of descriptive qualitative research approach out of books, journals, along with making use of text critical study and research framework.

IV. DISCUSSION

i. Analyzing the selected novels:

The novels entitled *The Moth Eaten Howdah Of The Tusker* by Indira Goswami and *The Dowry Bride* by Shobhan Bantwal taken up for study inquire into how the stiff social norms and religious practices in the name of customs are eroding the human dignity. The “Peripheral” is not to be misunderstood as an umbrella term for Indian Culture rather it is the reflection of the author towards the repressive tyrannical practices, prevailing in the novels.

The novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* explores the restrictive environment surrounding the “Brahmin Widows”, the “Bodily Desires”, and the “Sattras”. The widows were succumbing to live a life of a molded puppet. Being a woman in a constructive patriarchal world has immense challenges in itself furthermore “widowhood” imposes tons of unbearable loads upon these women. The three widows introduced in the novel- Saru Gossainee, Giribala, Durga though have their own individual plights but were woven from the same thread. Durga, the one adheres to the traditional practices of widowhood, where she accepts what was imposed on her as her destiny. She was thrown out of her marital house by her in-laws just after the death of her husband. This clearly shows Women as tenants in both her maternal and marital house belonging fully to neither. Moreover the seizing of all her wealth just after her attainment of widowhood highlights the economic imbalances prevailing in the gendered society. It is also regarded that when a man dies, it is his wife fault to be not fortunate enough to hold the longevity of his soul and hence she is treated as a prisoner which showcases the cruel cultural bias.

Giribala, another woman has the same fate. She was widowed at a very tender age which is the result of the rush to get girls married as soon as possible and in many cases even before they attained puberty to man quite older to them. The Sattras in the guise of a “protector” in reality are exploiting human dignity. In one such incident, when she returned back to her parent’s home, things were not different. She was made to erase herself as a person with a mind, body and soul. When she wanted to go near the

pond, Durga intervened and told her, “Now things have changed. You are a widow” (Goswami, 408). The rules of the “Pratha” that a widow has to perform or go through are inhuman where they were stripped off their individuality. Every facets of their existence from clothing to dietary demands adjustments and more ridiculous is the fact that they are supposed to make themselves invisible within the community. Giribala was not amongst those who would succumb to all these conservatism and hence was a voice of protest. Once when she runs to Mark’s hut to escape from being taken away by her in-laws and lead a miserable life shows her way of protest. Based on mere suspicion rather than any proof, the villagers found it impure or sinful for a widow being caught within the premises of another man; consequently seek to purify her through rituals. Patriarchal authority doesn’t require any explanation and eventually everything have to be true what their eyes see and what they construct. Giribala resisted to perform anything to proof herself and her validation. Instead she sacrificed and offered herself to the fire. This was her way of tragic protest amidst the oppressive power dynamics.

Saru Gossainee, another widow’s ‘Bodily Desires’ and ‘Love’ for Mahidar remain repressed under the narrow minded ‘Sattras’. Mahidar acting as the male predator fixes his eyes on his prey Saru Gossainee by making her believe that her affection is being reciprocated. He deceives her both financially and emotionally. The rigid social boundaries of the ‘Sattras’ and being ‘a woman and a widow’ silenced Saru Gossainee preventing her to seek justice against Mahidar’s exploitation and turning herself to a ‘meek observer’. Furthermore ‘menstruation’ hints at the deeply ingrained nature of the ‘taboo’ within societal structures. In the ‘Sattras’ menstruating women are regarded as impure and were distanced from participating in religious or social activities and are regarded to make themselves invisible as it states, “In the sattras, menstruation is considered to be the “greatest sin” and no one touches a woman during her “monthly flow” because of the risk of contracting the impurity (Goswami, 128). This is a way to hover power and control over women’s body by male populace resulting in stigma and fundamental imbalance in equality sidelining women in a subservient position.

The novel *The Dowry Bride* of Shobhan Bantwal highlights the burning issue of ‘Dowry’ within a traditional Indian setting which indeed is saturated with uncountable acts of violence including murder, exploitation, suppression. Bantwal portrays a landscape of gender disparity and the oppressive outlook towards wives often looked as unpaid laborers. Megha, the protagonist is portrayed as vulnerable from the moment she entered into

this world as a girl which exposes the crude nature of gender inequality. As Shobhan Bantwal points out in the text:

“Her father was in his forties, her mother in her thirties. When they were desperately hoping it would at least turned to be boy after they had produced two girls, aged thirteen and eleven, along she came- another infant girl- will the wants, needs and tribulations of a female.” (Bantwal, 11)

Megha was beautiful and educated born into a middle class family; however the pressure of early marriage was the only primary concern of her family. In general in India it is seen how the groom's family often turns the bride's family into scapegoats. When Megha's parents were unable to produce the dowry Suresh's mother Amma decided to get rid of her by burning her alive as points out to Suresh, “Don't you understand that she is worthless? Amma rolled her eyes seemingly, frustrated with her son's lack comprehension. Her father is never going to come up with the dowry. His actions are what I call illegal.” (Bantwal, 18)

They own a mindset where ‘killing’ somebody is viewed as ‘legal’ whereas incompetent to cater to their greed (dowry) is ‘illegal’. Within the institution of marriage, the perceived urgency of bearing children follows closely; unfortunately, a failure to do so can lead to domestic abuse. This is evident in Megha's situation too, as being unable to provide them with the beautiful grandchildren, as they expected gives birth to further conflict. From the very hour that Megha joins the Ramnath family, she becomes a prey to their ill treatment. Bantwal showcases how women exploit women specifically how Amma loses her basic humanity in the quest for wealth, disguised in the name of ‘custom’ and ‘tradition’ being used as a tool of control and power. Growing up under the blanket of tradition and social barriers women somehow get themselves entangled within its web. When Megha runs into Kunal's (Suresh's cousin) house under emotional circumstances she got captivated. She falls into the web of love for Kunal which blossomed equally from both sides. However after consuming their relationship but being traditionally bound, she finds herself as a failure in keeping herself chaste. She undertakes an unexpected move ‘an attempt to suicide’. The irony lies in the fact that she ran away from Amma and Suresh to save her life yet attempts to end it herself. It is a kind of trauma and entrapment that denies her agency in all possible ways. The threads of “should and shouldn't” are being woven to the women so tightly that she becomes a part of the fabric either consciously or subconsciously.

ii. The exploitation of women in selected novels:

Novels serve as the medium of general truths. It acts as a mirror which reflects societal flaws, harsh realities along with its values and inherent complexities. The Exploitation of women is neither a new phenomenon nor a recent development which has taken birth recently, rather it is a systematic chained issue that is running in a continuous process.

Both Indira Goswami and Shobhan Bantwal come up with addressing those burning exploitation in their selected novels of them i.e. *The Dowry Bride* and *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. We witnessed how the female members of the clan were exploited no matter whether it is Giribala, Durga, Saru Gossainee or Megha, the pervasive force had stripped them of their fundamental agency. They were identified not by who they are but to whom they were related to; as someone's widow, someone's daughter or someone's wife. The controlling nature of patriarchal society has resulted in leaving no room for woman's agency and their escape becomes what Langston Hughes famously termed a ‘deferred dream’ (line 1).

V. CONCLUSION

The study critically examines the selected novels of Indira Goswami and Shobhan Bantwal. It explores how the culture and tradition of India though diverse and rich in cultural heritage and traditional framework but yet occupied with conflicting values. The significant practices such as ‘Dowry’, ‘customs and traditions’, ‘marriage’, ‘widowhood’, ‘gender gap’ acts enforcing factors that intertwines tradition and culture in India, consequently it built a complex web of entrapment which proliferate more to the plight of the ‘suppressed’ and ‘marginalized’. From these observations we can draw clear elements of subjugation and peripheralism inherent in certain aspects as far as Indian culture and tradition is concerned.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bantwal, S. (2015). *The dowry bride*. Fingerprint. Publishing.
- [2] Dutta, S. (2019). Indira Goswami's *The moth eaten howdah of the tusker*: Manifestation of society and culture. *JETIR*, 6(3), 622-623.
- [3] Gandhi, S. (2022). Thematic analysis of Shobhan Bantwal's selected novels. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/579280>
- [4] Goswami, I. (2002). *The moth eaten howdah of the tusker* (I.Goswami, Trans). Rupa.
- [5] Goswami, I. (2002). A complete novel: *The moth eaten howdah of the tusker* (Dantal hatir une khowa howdah). In K.B. Satarawala(Ed.), *Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom*

Goswami) and her fictional world: The search for the sea(pp. 385-709). B.R. Publishing Corporation.

- [6] Hughes, L. (1994). Harlem. In A.Rampersad(ED.), *The collected poems* of Langston Hughes (p.426). Alfred A. Knopf. (Original work published 1951).
- [7] Roy, T.C. (2019). Revolt and resilience: The role of women in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. *IJCRT*, 7(1).
- [8] Saikia, R. (2021). Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (Dantal Haatir Uye Khowa Howdah): A discussion. *International Journal of Management (IJM)*, 12(2), 684-688.
- [9] Saradha, R. (2014). Quest for autonomy and self identity: A study of novels of Manju Kapur and Shoban Bantwal. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/133599>